Give Thanks to the Lord!

Psalm136:1-26

July 22, 2022

There is a beautiful quality among the Japanese people: they do not forget to give thanks. Of course, there are exceptions everywhere, but generally, Japanese people remember the favors, kindness, and blessings they have received, and they continue to carry in their hearts the desire to repay them someday. That is why Japanese dislike ungrateful people and look down on those who neglect obligations of duty. One might say this is common to every people, but it is especially strong among the Japanese.

And yet, we often show gratitude for small things, saying “thank you” frequently, while failing to notice and give attention to the greater things. At times, we may politely thank a stranger for a small kindness, but remain insensitive to the kindness of those closest to us. If someone were to give us a brand-new luxury car, anyone would be overjoyed and thankful. However, it is common not to express much gratitude toward one’s parents, who from childhood have taken care of us in every possible way. Indeed, a lack of gratitude toward one’s parents has become characteristic of modern Japanese people.

It is the same with God. If we were to win a lottery prize of one million yen, even if God had done nothing, we might still say, “Thank you, God!” Yet few people give thanks for the air without which they could not live ten minutes. We may bow many times to someone who shares a delicious dish with us, but very few give thanks to God, who ripens the grains, provides fruits, and enables us to eat meat and fish.

The worst attitude toward God is to calmly accept His grace, blessings, and protection—and then ignore Him. It is to behave as if we live by our own strength alone. But God is always near us—whether we are aware of it or not—protecting, helping, giving, and blessing us. Let us once again become conscious of this God and offer Him our thanks. Let us recall each blessing one by one, and give thanks. When our hearts are downcast, let us remember God’s blessings, lift up our faces toward Him, and give

thanks. When we are overwhelmed by sorrow, let us count God's blessings, fix our eyes on Him, and sing songs of thanksgiving. Just as the psalmist did, let us remember each thing God has done, and give thanks aloud.

I. Giving Thanks for Every Good Thing and Every Good Event

Thanksgiving is an important element of worship, but in a sense, it is placed lower than praise. Praise belongs to God absolutely—whether I exist or not, even if I were destroyed, and even if the earth itself were burned away, God must still be praised as the absolute One. Thanksgiving, however, is given only when there is someone to give thanks—that is, when I am here, and God has done something wonderful for me personally. Praise is offered because God is God; thanksgiving is offered because God has done something good for me.

We often do not think about or remember how many wonderful things God has done for us, and continues to do for us every day. Let us pause, lay aside our work, step away from the bustle of this human world, and deliberately recall and search out what God has done and is doing for us. Let us number them one by one and give thanks for each of them. Let us give thanks that we are placed within the beauty of the natural environment. Above all, let us give thanks that life itself has been given to us. And moreover, let us greatly give thanks that this life has been created in the image of God. Because of this, we can instinctively love what is good, delight in what is beautiful, respect harmony in our living, perceive God's creation as beautiful, and taste food as delicious. Let us also give thanks that life is preserved and sustained with the provision of clothing, food, and shelter. Let us give thanks for kind parents, for the gift of dear children. Let us give thanks for relatives with whom we can freely and warmly associate, and for good friends around us.

Let us also give thanks that there are capable statesmen. Whatever we may say, Japan remains a stable nation. We have not faced national calamities so severe as to bring total ruin. Even when difficulties have arisen, they have been solved without

descending into the very worst. Among the Japanese there have been many people of sacrificial spirit, who have risen up, setting themselves aside for the sake of the nation or for the people.

It is true that Japan is criticized as a nation where it is hard to raise children with peace of mind, and that the decline in population is advancing at a rapid pace. Yet at the same time, there are few environments in the world where children can be raised as safely as in Japan. In many parts of the world, child-rearing takes place under conditions many times worse than in Japan. When we, the present elderly generation, were born, the environment in Japan was truly miserable compared to today. Even so, people of what is called the "baby boom generation" were born in the midst of that era. We tend to search out faults and shortcomings in everything and complain, but we must not forget to give thanks as well. Instead of multiplying complaints, let us look for things for which we can give thanks.

II. Let Us Give Thanks for the Work of Redemption

What we ought to give thanks for most of all is God's work of salvation—His redeeming act. Why is it that God did not seek to save the angels who sinned, but instead sought to save human beings, who are functionally lower than angels, from the destruction that is the result of sin? The Bible does not state the reason, so we cannot declare it with certainty. But pastors tend to think that it originates in the fact that human beings were created from the beginning to be objects of God's love.

God did not create human beings for their usefulness, but so that they might be the recipients of His love—that is, that they might be like beloved pets of God. I do not know the exact price of a prime beef cow, but I imagine it exceeds one million yen. A pet cat in one's home may cost at most tens of thousands of yen. But if they were to die, for which one would you grieve more deeply? Our actions are determined not by objective market value, but by subjective feelings.

And so God, seeing human beings who had sinned and were walking toward eternal destruction, determined—at all costs—to save them. Not because we are worthy beings,

but because we were the objects of His love. We were created in such a way. When we are weighed down by sin and utterly sunk in it, let us remember: we are loved. That is the truth. This love does not change because of our foolish behavior.

Because of this love, God laid out a grand plan for human salvation and brought it into action. Jesus Christ gave up the throne of God, took on human form, and came into this world—because we are loved. Jesus Christ experienced every kind of human reality—suffering, sorrow, pain, and even failure—because we are loved. Jesus Christ endured an unjust trial without speaking a word in His defense—because we are loved. He bore the crown of thorns, endured slaps, punches, beatings with rods, spitting, insults, and mockery—all because we are loved. He carried the heavy cross on the long road, He was nailed through hands and feet, His side was pierced with a spear—all of it was for us, because we are loved, because it was for our salvation.

We are loved. When we feel worthless, when we dislike ourselves, when we are rejected and excluded by others, let us remember: we are loved by the Lord of creation. Let us recall this truth and offer prayers of thanksgiving. Let us express our gratitude with all our strength.

III. Expressing Our Gratitude — A

There is nothing better than to express our feelings simply and honestly. Let us offer prayers of thanksgiving. Instead of just saying vaguely, "I thank You for everything," and ending it there, let us sometimes recall each matter, each event, and give thanks specifically for them. By doing so, our sense of gratitude will grow stronger, and our longing for God will deepen. And let us also act out our gratitude. Not merely with words, but with deeds let us give thanks. True feelings are always accompanied by action.

Many people expressed their gratitude by dedicating their abilities to God. Still more people expressed their gratitude by devoting their very lives. Peter, John, James—they all gave themselves. There were also not a few who gave of their wealth in service, as an expression of gratitude. Zacchaeus declared that he would give half of his

possessions, and if he had extorted anyone, he would repay fourfold. This too was an expression of gratitude, and a sign of his decision to walk a different kind of life.

What is wrong with the offerings demanded by the Jehovah's Witnesses or the Unification Church is that they are not voluntary offerings, but forced ones. They insist they are not coercive, but in fact they brainwash. By brainwashing, they close off every path except to give, so that it becomes forced giving.

In Old Testament times, people expressed their gratitude to God by offering one-tenth of their income. But in the age of the New Testament, beyond the offerings prescribed by the law, people gave freely, according to what they were able, as a way of serving God and expressing gratitude. Many sold their lands or properties to support the work of the church. Joseph, who helped bring Paul into recognition and fellowship among the apostles, sold his estate in Cyprus and used the proceeds to aid the poor. For this reason he was given the nickname Barnabas—"son of encouragement." This was one form of voluntary expression of gratitude in the New Testament.

David Livingstone, the great missionary who devoted his life to the evangelization of Africa, once attended a worship service as a child without any money in his pocket. When the offering plate was passed to him, he knelt down upon it and prayed: "Lord, I give You my life." He was just a small boy, yet he made the most precious offering. That was his greatest expression of gratitude. What kind of expression of gratitude can we offer today?

IV. Expressing Our Gratitude — B

Livingstone offered something greater than money. From our perspective today, his work could be criticized as having been entangled with British colonialism, and thus subject to harsh judgment. Yet, his personal dedication was without error. Even within the wrong policies of the Western Christian nations' colonialism, good was accomplished, and through him, many Africans were able to hear the gospel.

There is no expression of gratitude more wonderful than proclaiming the gospel. It is to share God's love and teach the greatness of God's salvation. To stake our very lives on the work for which Jesus Christ staked His life—this is the supreme expression

of gratitude. It is not for ourselves, not for personal gain, but in self-denial to follow the Lord. Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. We too lay down our lives for His glory and His love.

When we proclaim the gospel as an expression of gratitude, the redeeming work of God shines forth among people. If we do not proclaim God's salvation, no one will ever know it. The cross of the Lord will end in vain. But if we proclaim the gospel with joy and thanksgiving, then the gospel will shine in people's hearts, become a new power that transforms human beings, and transform society itself.

The gospel is a precious treasure entrusted to us. Let us proclaim it with inexpressible gratitude. If it is not spoken, it will remain like a treasure wasted in storage. Let us proclaim the gospel with thanksgiving. And let us proclaim it with joy, in the hope and expectation that people will be saved and receive eternal life.